ON PAGE 20A
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U.S. pays dearly for its scarcity of translators

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WASHINGTON — A shortage of Berber translators helped kill two U.S. Army sergeants, Kenneth T. Ford and James E. Goins, intelligence experts believe.

They say that intercepted Libyan diplomatic messages warning of the April 5 Berlin nightclub bombing — in which Ford was killed and Goins was fatally injured — went untranslated for several days because of an increasingly common problem: a scarcity of skilled linguists.

In fact, the discotheque attack, which provoked the U.S. bombing of Libya 10 days later, is but one of five recent military and intelligence setbacks in which the linguist shortage played a part.

Yurchenko

The issue is not new. Five years ago, Adm. Bobby R. Inman, then deputy director of the CIA, warned in congressional testimony that "steadily deteriorating language training capabilities" presented "a major hazard to our national security."

Today, top military, diplomatic and intelligence officials are convinced that crises with a linguistic angle are no fluke. They acknowledge what Craig L. Wilson, the Defense Department's director of intelligence personnel and training, calls "dismal ignorance" of Third World languages. They confess to policies that discourage foreign language experts, and admit critical and growing shortages of highly skilled linguists even in such common languages as French and German.

Case in point

The problem was underscored last November when Soviet double-defector Vitaly Yurchenko announced in front of television cameras his intention to return to the Soviet Union after three months in CIA custody.

Speaking English so awkwardly that it dramatized his point, Yurchenko, the highest-ranking KGB official ever to defect, complained that "during these three horrible months for you I didn't have any chance to speak Russian. I was explained that they say there is a shortage of Russian-speaking translators."

Indeed, there is "a serious shortage of really competent Russian linguists at the agency," according to Donald F. Jameson, a retired senior Soviet operations officer at the CIA. "And you cannot really deal with an important case like Yurchenko unless you can do it in the man's native language."

One month before Yurchenko's exit, Soviet seaman Miroslav Medvid's freedom apparently was lost in the translation when he was returned to Soviet custody after jumping ship near New Orleans. Border Patrol officials and interpreter Irene Padoch disagreed on whether Medvid sought asylum — a hard question because Padoch was not fluent in Medvid's dialect, according to intelligence officials.

In two other cases, U.S. intelligence may have been breached by employees hired in part for their fluency in important difficult languages.

The Chin case

Larry Wu-Tai Chin, "one of the best" Chinese translators at the CIA, could skim Chinese publications, interpret nuances in official documents and translate many Chinese dialects, according to a memorandum by his former boss, Cy Braegelmann.

Chin, so vitally competent that he was cleared for classifications above top secret, committed suicide in February after he was convicted of spying for more than 30 years for his native China.

In another spy case, Ronald W. Pelton, a former National Security Agency communications expert currently on trial for treason, probably would not have been hired in 1965, intelligence officials said, without a knowledge of Russian gained as an Air Force enlistee.

Skill in Russian is far rarer in the United States, where only about 28,000 students study Russian, according to the Modern Language Association, than is skill in English in the Soviet Union, where it is studied by 10 million.

Even within the State Department's career Foreign Service, advanced language skills are in short supply. Only about 50 of its more than 4,000 Foreign Service personnel speak and read French with the genuine fluency of a well-educated native, according to Ambassador Monteagle Stearns, who is studying the State Department's advanced language skills and urging reforms.

Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., a persistent promoter of foreign languages, noted in an interview that only six of the 66 hostages taken at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 spoke any Farsi, the dominant native language of Iran.

Price of ignorance

The price of ignorance, Simon continued, quoting former hostage Morehead Kennedy, was that "We were speaking to the elite in English; we didn't know what was going on in the streets of Tehran."

Even when skilled linguists are available in the Foreign Service, they are not necessarily posted where they are needed. Two speak Lingala, for example, a major tribal language of Zaire; one is currently stationed in Kingston, Jamaica, and the other in Paris, according to the State Department's personnel records.

A shortage of skilled linguists, said Inman, the retired admiral who now heads Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corp. of Austin, Texas, "means that you run a high risk of unpleasant surprises."

Continued

 2

"Contrary to the common view that our knowledge of a foreign country comes from clandestine operations and electronic surveillance," Inman continued, "the bulk of our knowledge comes from open sources. By that I mean people who observe, who sit, who listen, who talk, who read the media, who know the mosques, the bazaars and the coffeehouses."

Shortages persist

Although the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif., teaches 61 languages, and the Foreign Service Institute in Roslyn, Va., teaches 45, shortages persist of speakers of obscure and difficult languages, such as Berber and Pashto, Farsi, Urdu and Dari.

"It doesn't surprise me a hoot," said retired Army Lt. Gen. James A. Williams, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) from 1981-85, that problems in translating Berber apparently delayed warning of the Berlin disco attack.

U.S. and Israeli analysts familiar with the messages involved in the Berlin incident say the major impediment was that they were in Berber, a language often used by Libyan diplomats to assure confidentiality.

"Given the volume of threats in Europe, and our reliance on contract emigres for languages like Berber, you probably have no one working 'round the clock," Williams explained.

"The whole Third World is a helluva problem," Williams continued. "We can turn out French, Russian, Spanish and German speakers, but that's not where the crises are. The crises are in the Middle East and Africa, strange places where you need linguists who can't get or maintain fluency very easily."

But in 1981 testimony to a House education subcommittee, Williams' predecessor, Maj. Gen. Richard X. Larkin, testified that DIA would continue to stress "the prevailing Western languages of former colonial regions, which comprise most developing countries."

At the CIA there was "no bank of talent" to replace the retiring generation of translators hired after World War II, Inman said.

The State Department, which Sen. Simon said has "the only foreign service in the world that you can get into without speaking a foreign language," also discouraged language specialists in the '60s.

"The perception was that it was better to be a senior staff aide or a program manager than a language or area specialist," Stearns recalled.

And the perception was right, he concluded after analyzing the backgrounds of 147 Foreign Service officers promoted since 1975 to the top rung of the State Department's career ladder. While they were expected to speak two foreign languages, according to the Foreign Service manual, Stearns found that 31 of the 147 spoke none.

Stearns' proposal to stress foreign language in promotions and reserve some top embassy slots abroad for careerists with near-native fluency is under study at the State Department.